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CITY-PLANNING IN NEW YORK CITY—HOW ALL CAN COÖPERATE

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CITY-PLANNING as a science is of recent origin, but city-planning, such as it was, began with the first streets and the first docks laid out by the original Dutch settlers in New York. For the first two centuries of its existence the plan of New York developed in a haphazard manner; it followed the demands of immediate convenience. It was not until 1807, when a few optimistic men laid out a street plan for all the rest of Manhattan Island, that any thought was taken for the future of the city. The great mass of the public thought the men who designed this plan absolutely crazy in imagining that New York would ever grow to such a size; however, this plan has been followed above Fourth street and it is substantially our present gridiron scheme. As water transportation was of primary importance in those days, and as no one foresaw the changes which would be brought about by the application of steam and electricity to transportation, the whole street layout was based on the idea of the maximum amount of intercourse between the two waterfronts and a minimum amount of movement the length of the island. In the light of our present knowledge this arrangement should have been exactly reversed, and the long city blocks should have run north and south instead of east and west.

A few squares and small parks were sprinkled over this plan, but no large park was provided for until Central Park was set apart and laid out in 1858; then followed Prospect Park and much later the Bronx parks. Morningside Park, the Speedway, Riverside Drive with its extensions, Forest Park and other smaller ones followed in due time; while latterly we have the new Coney Island and Rockaway reservations. These parks have been the greatest boon to New York city; they have been

aptly described as the "lungs" of the city. They have had a marked effect on its healthfulness and enjoyableness; they have been of particular benefit to the children. Furthermore, they are among the most beautiful parks in the country.

New York has done much, too, in the way of playgrounds. The playground movement, to be sure, has been of comparatively recent origin, the principal development being within the last ten years; and while there are a number of well-equipped and well-managed playgrounds in the crowded portions of the city, they are quite inadequate in size or number for the needs of the community. The difficulty is that land costs so much now in congested districts that anything like an adequate acquisition of space for public playgrounds becomes impossible. The recreation piers have done something to solve the difficulty, but it remains so to plan the outlying districts that the mistakes of the past may be avoided in the future.

New systems of streets are being laid out all the time; not only is the whole street layout of 1807 solidly built up, but the same congestion extends into large areas of Brooklyn and the Bronx, and is even beginning to extend into Queens and Richmond. Each of the five boroughs has its own topographical department or bureau of surveys, which is constantly laying out new streets. Over all the bureaus is the engineering department of the board of estimate and apportionment, which is trying valiantly to unify the whole street development of the city. Owing to the powerlessness of the city to control private subdivisions, it is most difficult to work out an ideal general plan for the five boroughs. Attempts are being made to study this problem in a scientific way, particularly in the Borough of Manhattan, but this work receives very little support from the public, on account of a lack of understanding of its great advantages.

The transit problem is at present much before the public. We already have in our street cars, elevated railroads and subways an interesting and earnest attempt to solve this problem; the new routes now being laid out will do a great deal more toward rounding out the transit system of New York. A great deal remains to be done, however, and this can be done only

when the general public awakes to a realization of the importance of the subject.

In its dock development New York is very fortunate. In Manhattan, in particular, the city owns nearly ninety per cent of the waterfront, and can thereby control its future development. It is greatly to be regretted that it does not have a similar control over the waterfront in the other boroughs. It has in the privately owned Bush Terminal in Brooklyn the best example in America of a scientifically developed port scheme. The efficient and economical relation here between the piers, the sheds, the factories and the dwellings with their intercommunicating railways and sidings are most worthy of careful study. The present dock commissioner, Honorable Calvin Tomkins, has presented many good schemes for the scientific use and development of the city's waterfront. No unsupported public official, however, can carry through such plans.

The railways are continually making progress in the solution of the problem of the transportation of goods into and out of the city and between different parts of the city, but they are greatly hampered by lack of understanding and coöperation on the part of the general public and thereby of the city. There is an enormous amount of time, energy and money wasted in New York by lack of adequate and scientifically placed and planned freight terminals and connections. The problems of what to do with the lower west side of Manhattan and how to take care of the new industrial development in the Bronx are problems of vital importance affecting the whole question of the high cost of living, yet little is done to help bring about a solution.

In the transportation of people in and out of the city by the railways we have another great and important problem, one on which an enormous amount of money has recently been spent by roads like the New York Central and the Pennsylvania; yet in the latter case in particular the city has done practically nothing to coöperate. Again, public understanding and coöperation are of the greatest importance.

In housing there has grown up in New York city a set of conditions practically unique; the five and six-story tenement

covering seventy per cent of a lot one hundred feet deep is almost exclusively a New York problem. Many attempts have been made to solve this, most important of which was the work of the tenement-house committee, resulting in the tenement-house law adopted about ten years ago. This law, while far from ideal, was a splendid achievement under the conditions then existing and it has vastly bettered conditions. On the island of Manhattan, further improvement of housing conditions is extremely difficult; already there are large sections of the Bronx and Brooklyn to which the same statement applies; attention should be concentrated on the areas as yet uncongested. A popular appreciation of the evils of congestion is of the greatest importance. Once the matter is understood it will be much easier to bring the public to coöperate in demanding a solution of the housing problem by scattering the dwellings of the people over a larger area with a correspondingly decreased density per acre. Obviously people must live within easy walking distance of their work or else the means of transit between the places where they work and those where they live must be quick, cheap, safe and comfortable. As transit is fast reaching its efficient limit, it remains to concentrate on bringing the work out to the people; this means offering inducements in the way of good waterfront and freight-handling facilities in the outlying districts. A general provision of such facilities can be secured only by an intelligent and general popular demand.

Together with this problem of housing comes that of markets, schools, libraries, gymnasiums and baths. Popular interest and demand has brought about a wise and fairly adequate disposition of schools and libraries; the public has not yet awakened to the corresponding necessity for a proper distribution of markets, baths, and gymnasiums. A limited number of baths and gymnasiums exist in Manhattan; the other boroughs are suffering badly from the lack of them; only in the Bronx has the question of markets been agitated to any extent.

Civic centers as formally designed groups do not exist in New York. Within the last few years, however, the question of civic centers has been strongly agitated. This has resulted, in Manhattan, in the acceptance of a scheme for a civic center

about the present city hall. With a view to unifying the scheme, however, the location of the new municipal building is most unfortunate. An attempt to unify the present Brooklyn system about the Borough Hall is also a distinct step in advance; as is also the recent suggestion for a civic group in connection with the present Borough Hall in Richmond. In Columbia University, with its surrounding educational buildings, we have a real educational center. Aside from these groups, however, the gain in efficiency and beauty wherever civic buildings are grouped can be seen from many examples both in this country and abroad. It is desirable that the public should become acquainted with these facts so that they can demand results along these lines.

In the various features of water supply, sewage disposal, garbage and refuse collecting, and street cleaning, New York compares well with other cities, but except in the matter of water supply it has many possibilities of improvement. The public in general is indifferent. While this indifference remains, improvement is not likely to progress much more rapidly than it now does; and yet new problems are arising due to the very vastness of the undertakings in New York which imperatively demand radical changes, particularly in sewage disposal.

In the details of the architectural and landscape settings of the streets, parks, and open places, the city is making good progress, particularly in its street lighting and street signposts; but in the use of street trees, in the decorative handling of street signs, and in the use of other such accessories as letter boxes, hydrants, statues, public comfort stations, subway entrances, elevated structures and water-troughs there is much room for improvement. Here again popular demand is needed. In its bridges and approaches the city has been reasonably fortunate. The existence of the Municipal Art Commission has helped materially toward getting good results in all these public structures, but owing to lack of popular support the work of the commission has been far more difficult than it should be.

In methods of taxation and assessment with a view to carrying out public improvements New York city compares favorably with other communities both here and abroad. It is noteworthy

in this connection that a committee of the board of estimate and apportionment is considering the question of new sources of revenue for the city. The separating of assessments on land and on improvements, the annual or biennial re-assessment of property and the assessment of a betterment tax on the immediate abutters on new improvements are changes of great value to the city. The methods of taxation and the restrictions on the use of land in other cities, however, should be seriously considered here: such are the unearned-increment tax, excess-condemnation laws, zoning, districting, regulating the height and character of buildings.

Interest in city planning in general in New York has been of slow growth, particularly as compared with other cities of the country. The Pendleton commission appointed by the Mayor about ten years ago handed in an elaborate report dealing principally with the creation of new diagonal avenues in Manhattan and Brooklyn, the improvement of the bridge approaches, the designing of civic centers and the extension of the park system. Considering the state of the science of city-planning at that time, their reports compared very favorably with those of other cities. Very few of their suggestions have been carried into effect, however, because few of them were based on a scientific analysis of prevailing conditions. In other words, the modern business man, with his common-sense ideas of efficiency, found these plans to be impractical.

More recently, the Fifth Avenue Association in Manhattan and the Brooklyn city-planning committee have been conducting an active campaign toward civic improvement, particularly along the line of the "City Beautiful."

The Municipal Art Commission, founded and backed by the Municipal Art Society, has had a marked effect upon the standards of civic architecture. The Mayor's Congestion Commission of 1910 and 1911, for whose establishment the New York Congestion Committee may claim credit, has accomplished a great work in giving publicity to the economic and social evils occasioned by overcrowding in New York City; it has done much toward arousing the general public and the city officials to a feeling of social responsibility, particularly in civic matters.

As a result of all these movements there has been a growing demand of late for a city-planning commission for the whole of New York city, similar in functions and powers to those existing in other cities. Opposition on the part of the various borough presidents who have been afraid that the creation of such a commission would deprive them of some of their jealously guarded prerogatives has prevented this matter from coming to a head.

There is a vital need of such a commission; the problems which confront New York city are becoming more and more involved every day; each of the city departments is going ahead and trying to solve its individual problems as best it knows how. Even where a favorable disposition exists, it is extremely difficult for any one department to coöperate with the others; very few of the department heads have the time, money, or breadth of vision to attempt to solve their problems in relation to the needs of the city as a whole. The suggestions that are being propounded now by the dock department, admirable as they are in themselves, may be distinctly detrimental to the best interests of the city as a whole, in running counter to its needs from the standpoints of housing, recreation, transit or manufacturing. Plans now being proposed for transit improvement may run counter to the best interests of the city in its commercial, manufacturing and housing development. It is imperative to-day that a commission be appointed to correlate and unify all these different phases of the city's development. Such a commission should consist of men representing all that is best in breadth of vision, variety of point of view and practical common sense—men in whom the public can have confidence.

Such a commission will be secured in only one way, and that is by educating the public to the needs of city-planning in its broadest sense, and thus creating an irresistible demand for action. This education will come about only by the coöperation of all the civic, social, esthetic, legal, political and religious bodies of the city. It means that in all such associations, societies, clubs or other groups, active committees should be formed to work continuously, in season and out, to spread the propaganda of city planning. This can be done by circularizing,

lectures, exhibitions, and personal work. Each body may emphasize that phase of the general subject which more particularly affects its interests, but in every case the relation of this particular phase to all the other aspects of the subject should be kept constantly in mind.

City-planning as a subject is becoming of greater importance every year. Within a comparatively short time, it is going to be one of the most important questions before the public. It affects all sides of life. It affects vitally every man, woman and child. It is the part of far-sighted wisdom to take up the subject of city-planning with promptness and zeal.

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